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# Hillbillies, Rednecks, Crackers and White Trash

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## **Hillbillies, Crackers, Rednecks, and White Trash**

The myriad labels for poor and working-class white southerners have long been used as pejorative putdowns and embraced as markers of regional and cultural identity. Although vernacular usage almost certainly goes back in time much further, appearances in print of the dominant terms for these people on the social and economic fringe date back to at least the 18th century. The term "cracker" first appeared in the 1760s whereas "poor white trash" (often condensed to "po' white trash" or just "white trash") began to appear semiregularly in the 1830s, used first by African Americans to refer to nonslaveholding whites and then by wealthier whites as a means of stigmatizing and

denigrating nonblacks they deemed beneath them. "Redneck" and "hillbilly" date only to the turn of the 20th century, both first appearing in the explicitly political context of supporters or opponents of southern politicians but quickly thereafter expanding to other social and cultural settings.

These derisive labels and other similar terms were intended to indicate a diet rooted in scarcity ("clay eater," "corn-cracker," "rabbit twister"), physical appearance and clothing that denoted hard and specifically working-class laboring conditions ("redneck," "wool hat," "lint head"), an animal-like existence on the economic and physical fringes of society ("brush ape," "ridge runner," "briar hopper"), ignorance and racism, and, in all cases, economic, genetic, and cultural impoverishment (best summed up by the pointed label "poor white trash"). These terms spread with working-class southern whites as they migrated to southern and mid-western urban centers in the mid-20th century. In the civil rights movement era of the 1950s and 1960s these descriptors, especially "cracker" and "redneck," were widely used in news accounts and by civil rights activists to emphasize the backward-looking racism of southern lawmen and townspeople who fought integration.

Despite signifying generally the same cultural meanings, "cracker," "redneck," "hillbilly," and "white trash," the four most common of these terms, each has a distinct historical trajectory and connotations. "Cracker" initially referred to the boastfulness and lawless attitudes of backcountry squatters of the late 18th

century who were violating the ban on British colonists' settling of the trans-Appalachian West. By the turn of the 19th century, the term had extended to poor whites of the Georgia and Florida frontiers (perhaps because they were reliant on a diet of cracked corn or perhaps because of the cracking sounds of their whips as they drove livestock to market). By the early 20th century, the once primarily derogatory term evolved into an accepted, even celebrated, label of regional identity (as evidenced by the Atlanta Crackers minor-league baseball team, 1901-65, and its African American counterparts, the Atlanta Black Crackers, 1919-52). Nonetheless, in the late 20th century it could still easily be reapplied negatively, especially in the civil rights era, to instantly signify, to newspaper readers and television news viewers, racist intransigence and the potentiality for violence.

"Redneck" had an even more multifaceted provenance and significance. Initially it literally referred to the physical effect of exhausting outside agricultural labor and, later, to a general antiprogressive sensibility. It has therefore long been associated with poor dirt farmers both economically and politically (for instance, the hardscrabble supporters of Mississippi governor and later senator James Vardaman dubbed themselves "rednecks"). Slightly later, in the 1920s West Virginia mine wars when striking miners wore red bandanas, it was tied to radical unionization efforts. In the 1950s and 1960s it became synonymous with virulent racism and opposition to civil rights. Starting in the 1970s its meaning evolved again, as mil-

lions of the white working class (largely but not exclusively men) worked to redefine the term as a cultural identifier positioned in dual opposition to both the power and cultural values of the upper-middle class and what it perceived to be a welfare-dependent and minority underclass. In the decades since, the success of Jeff Foxworthy's *You Might Be a Redneck If . . .* joke books and comedy routines and similar cultural products have given it a more benign and broadly middle-class cultural meaning but still one that indicates racial whiteness and a resistance to intellectualism.

"Hillbilly" has proved to be the most ambiguous of these labels. Although ostensibly a term for residents of the southern mountains from the Ozarks to the Blue Ridge, the label has been applied to people and culture across the broad interior of the nation. It has been used simultaneously to evoke, on the one hand, degradation, violence, animalism, and carnality and, on the other, romanticized rurality, cultural and ethnic purity, pioneer heritage, and personal and communal independence and self-sufficiency. It thus has resonated most broadly with audiences both nationally and in the southern hill country and has been the most commonly used such label in popular culture. It has applied to country music (indeed, "hillbilly music" was the standard if at times contested term for the genre from the 1920s to the 1950s), a range of cartoons and comic strips, and the title of one of America's most popular and influential television shows (*The Beverly Hillbillies*). Both adopted and rejected by southern

mountain folk living in and outside of the region, it retained in the early 21st century its fundamental ambivalence, if not the social bite it once held.

"Poor white trash," the crudest of these terms, is nonetheless still routinely used in televised comedy and talk shows and even general conversation. It also is the one that most starkly reveals the fundamental tensions in all these words between a supposed normative racial identity ("white") and an antinormative (indeed, uncivilized) cultural and social status and outlook. Throughout the early 19th century the term was employed for different purposes by African Americans, abolitionists, and slavery apologists and defenders, all of whom used the label to critique (explicitly or implicitly) or justify the institution of slavery and its impact on southern society. In the early 20th century, textile mill operators and middle-class progressives who were heavily shaped by the predominant Social Darwinist view of biological social determinism also used the concept as a way of culturally bounding poor whites as lazy, dirty, criminal, and imbecilic degenerates who threatened national progress. The term thus was a means to assert the unquestionable superiority of their own cultural value system. By the late 20th century the term had lost altogether its southern regional specificity, instead becoming a generalized if increasingly cartoonish critique of non-people of color who rejected middle-class standards of social advancement and ways of living. In the same manner as did its companion terms, it thus reinforced the "naturalness" of middle class sensibili-

ties and justified economic inequality by blaming poor whites for their own lower social and economic status. Used as explanatory labels, these words thus were ultimately means of avoiding concerns about the failures of capitalism to truly benefit all in the society.

The explicitly political origins and consequences of these terms and their dominantly derogatory connotations, however, were hidden behind their ostensibly comical overtones, particularly for middle- and upper-class whites in positions of authority, but also, in a different context and with a different intent, for working-class whites and people of color. Accordingly, they have proved to be remarkably semantically and geographically malleable. As noted, since at least the 1970s, "hillbilly," "red-neck," "cracker," and, more recently, even "poor white trash" have all been reappropriated by some working-class and lower-middle-class whites as badges of class and racial identity and pride. In this context, they mark opposition to (or at least distinction from) hegemonic middle-class social aspirations and norms and, less explicitly, to the relative gain in status of African Americans and other minority social groups. As these terms have been increasingly embraced by those they were intended to denigrate, they have stretched well beyond their southern origins and are now used and adopted around the United States and even Canada.

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